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THE MAHARISHI

The Biography of the Man who gave Transcendental Meditation to the West

PAUL MASON

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PART I

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The Spirit and the Flesh

1

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MAHESH AND HIS MASTER

I mean look how it all started. I believe he just landed in Hawaii in his nightshirt, all on his own, nobody with him . . . – John Lennon[1]

For San Francisco Bay Airport, Thursday, 29 January 1959 was just another working day – more flights, more passengers, just like any other day. From Honolulu, Hawaii, came yet another scheduled flight, stimulating another flurry of activity for the uniformed customs men. Baggage handlers attended to their normal duties, unloading luggage from the hold of the plane and delivering it for collection. In the arrivals lounge were the normal complement of eager, expectant faces looking out for loved ones, business colleagues and the like. There was to be nothing out of the ordinary about the passengers today, no famous actors or politicians were due in.

As the new arrivals began to emerge, attention fell on one lone individual, a visitor from somewhere far beyond Hawaii. There, walking self-assuredly upon quaint hessian-banded wooden sandals came a figure of slight stature draped simply in a pure white robe with long, wayward, wavy black hair tumbling about his shoulders. His was a sunny, amiable countenance, with large glistening chestnut-brown eyes, broad flattened nose and cheeks both generous and shining, partially obscured by a flourishing growth of beard. On espying the carpet roll he clutched, any child might have fancied him to be an Arabian fakir come drifting in upon a magic spell. Much more likely was that he was a potentate from some small but wealthy kingdom, maybe a sultan or maharajah from the East who wished to travel incognito. The two Hawaiian nationals that escorted him out of the terminal could perhaps have explained something of the identity and mission of this mystery man.

The United States of America had but scant exposure to representatives of that rich cultural heritage which is India. Some sixty-

five years before, the great World Parliament of Religions of 1893 had paid host to the turbanned, corpulent personage of Swami Vivekananda and listened to his monkish philosophy. More recently, in 1920, the city of Boston had planned an International Congress of Religious Liberals which received, from a ship newly arrived after a two-month voyage from Calcutta, India, a delegate that many Americans later took to their hearts, the ochre-robed and deceptively youthful-looking Swami Paramahansa Yogananda.

With no plans to attend either parliament or congress, but nevertheless exuding unbridled confidence and virtually unbounded zeal, came India's latest emissary, known by his followers as His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

At his first press conference in the USA on Wednesday, 29 April 1959, he revealed his intention to spiritually regenerate the entire world, adding:

> My life truly began 19 years ago at the feet of my Master when I learned the secret of swift and deep meditation, a secret I now impart to the world.[2]

Prior to his arrival on Western shores, the man we now know as 'the Maharishi', had spent almost his entire life in India. It was at the age of twenty-three, in his home town of Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, that he first met Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, a wandering holy man of some renown:

> We were a few men who had gone to visit Guru Dev. We sat outside his door a long time until we were finally admitted. We sat down by the door which had been left open. Guru Dev sat in darkness. We could only sense his presence – he didn't talk to us. Suddenly a car drove by on the road and the headlights momentarily shone through the open door. For the first time I was able to see Guru Dev's face. Oh, it was a wonderful sight! I have never seen anything so wonderful. Immediately I experienced a deep reverence and devotion to him and I decided to do everything in my power to be in his surroundings.[3]

Mahesh evinced a strong desire to offer himself as a disciple to the elderly monk. The spontaneous commitment he felt for the hermit had the young man's parents deeply concerned. Voicing their disapproval in no uncertain terms, they did their utmost to dissuade him from taking to a life of renunciation. This was not the life they wanted for their son, not at all.

If he had overheard these concerned, conscientious parents, it

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would probably have brought a smile of recollection to the old hermit's austere countenance. As a young child of barely nine years old, he had witnessed a very similar reaction to his own deeply felt convictions.

Let us take a closer look at the life of this old *swami*, for it will be seen that he plays a key role in the story of the Maharishi, namely that of *guru* or master.

The city of Ayodhya, in northern India, is famous as the birthplace of Lord Rama, star of the ancient epic poem *Ramayana*. Lord Rama is worshipped as an *avataar* (incarnation of God), and his name is held sacred by millions.

On Sunday, 20 December 1868* in the village of Gana close to Ayodhya, Rajaram Mishra was born. His family were brahmins (the caste which provided both teachers and priests) and were relatively affluent, being *zaminder* or landlords. They were thus able to offer Rajaram a secure, comfortable childhood.

Perhaps this young boy would never had entered the annals of history but for two incidents which awakened him to the world beyond his playthings. When he was barely seven years old he suffered the loss of his most cherished companion, his grandfather, whose lifeless body was borne away to the chant of *Ram naam satya hai* ('The name of Ram – or God – is truth').[4] Rajaram took this *mantra* as guidance in his hour of need. Already of a retiring nature, the young lad became increasingly withdrawn, dwelling as he did upon the transitory nature of existence and its temporal happiness.

A year later Rajaram was enrolled at the Sanskrit Institute, an institution of some standing in the holy city of Benares (an ancient city known also by the names of Varanasi and Kashi). The very atmosphere of this pilgrim centre no doubt deepened the youngster's leanings and yearning towards a commitment to a spiritual life. As it happened he had not studied there long before his next major upheaval. As was the custom in that era, a child marriage had been arranged for him. We can but imagine the boy's feelings, at barely nine years of age, at being informed of his own impending wedding. He was of no mind to become a victim of his parents' schemes, and

* This is the date commonly held as the birthday of Rajaram Mishra, later to become Swami Brahmananda Saraswati. However the date given by Rameswar Tilwari (a devotee of his and editor of his writings) is Thursday, 21 December 1870.

being a boy of unusual pluck and determination, he made ready to break free, to do a disappearing trick.

For several days Rajaram journeyed along the banks of *Ganga Ma* the sacred 'mother' Ganges river, with faith as his only companion. From Benares he made his way to Allahabad (Prayag) and onward as far as Hardwar, intending to travel via Rishikesh to the Garwal Himalayas, an area steeped in ancient folklore. But discovery could be evaded for only so long and before arriving in Rishikesh a police inspector apprehended the young runaway and returned him safely to his parents.

His family were of one voice in their condemnation of his strange behaviour and unaccountable unworldliness. According to tradition, a young man's future lay in settling down to his duties and in being a credit to his community. Undeterred by such arguments he reasoned with his parents and with the local wise man, until at long last they acknowledged defeat and capitulated to his demand for freedom to seek his own path in life. His mother, in giving her permission to 'go and sing in praise of the Lord', exacted a promise from him not to become a 'begging sadhu'[5] and made him agree that should he ever hanker after the comforts of material life, he would return immediately.

Talking to the wise, mixing with the holy, the young truth-seeker drifted where inspiration led him. For food and lodgings the *ashrams* and *dharmashalas* (religious rest houses) would have all been open to him since, then as now, India was always accommodating to sincere seekers of the truth. Notwithstanding this custom of offering alms to travellers in search of holiness, life could not always have been easy for the young boy alone. Excursions into the byways of the Himalayan hinterland threatened many dangers, for wild beasts lurked there, including boars, bears and tigers. Rajaram's steadfast faith in his God held good, and he ventured freely and remained unscathed. In this solitary quest for self-realization, he recognized the need for guidance and thus entertained the hope of meeting someone who might offer him spiritual tutelage.

In his search he encountered many learned and sincere devotees, but met no one with whom he felt comfortable enough to entrust himself to them. On one occasion after having tracked down a *mahatma* (great soul), he waited patiently for the *swami* to emerge from meditation. After offering his respects and greetings, Rajaram requested him to provide him with fire. The yogi, who after his exercises had first appeared so serene and blissful, exploded in a rage

on hearing the boy's request. Perhaps he suspected the youngster's motives, for it is well known that in the tradition of *dandi* (staff) carrying *swamis*, the use of fire is generally avoided. Rajaram patiently endured the heated outpourings before calmly asking him from where this anger sprang, if not from fire. The *swami*, thoroughly abashed, hugged the lad and apologized profusely. Over the next few days he gave time to the precocious aspirant who had so impressed him, familiarizing the young seeker in the fundamentals of yoga discipline.

The search for living examples of the spiritual perfection Rajaram sought for himself continued and, at length, at the hermitage town of Uttar Kashi, in the Himalayas, he met Shri Swami Krishnanand Saraswati. In this teacher the boy found the qualities he sought, those of renunciation, celibacy and mastery of philosophy. Believing him to be a man of deep realization, Rajaram offered himself as disciple to this austere teacher, took initiation and received a new name, that of Brahma Chaitanya Brahmachari.

Along with his fellow *brahmacharin*, in surrendering to the rigours and demands of monkhood Brahma Chaitanya derived great support and love from his *guru*. Dedication to the service of his master in time resulted in a special dispensation being accorded to him. Shri Krishnanand 'banished' the young lad from his *ashram* and ordered him to enter a *gupha* (cave) a few miles away. With only weekly visits to his teacher on the day of *Guruvar* (Thursday), the novice set about the task of attaining enlightenment. His fellow pupils, unaware of the real purpose behind his 'banishment' from their community, believed him to have upset their teacher in some way. At length Shri Krishnanand resolved to address this situation and therefore sent a senior *brahmachari* to seek out the novice and to enquire of him whether there might be some empty cave that the master could come to stay in. The reply came back that there was none.

On the next Thursday when Brahma Chaitanya returned as usual to the *ashram* in order to receive his teacher's blessings, he found himself very unpopular with his fellow *brahmacharin*. It was common knowledge that there were many empty caves thereabouts, so his message that there were no empty caves in which the *guru* might stay, had, not unreasonably, been interpreted by them as untrue and therefore gravely insulting. When they were all gathered before Swami Krishnanand, his fellow pupils couldn't wait for their teacher to punish his insolent behaviour. Surveying the assembly with his large penetrating eyes, Shri Krishanand remained silent, as if unaware of

the ill-feeling that had arisen amongst his disciples. One of them spoke up:

> Maharaj, what penance, what atonement is prescribed for a person who disrespects his Guru? Disrespect amounts to contempt, does it not? How should such a man be treated who disrespects his Guru, shows contempt for him?[6]

The *guru* asked him to provide an example and the questioner hesitatingly revealed his motives for raising the issue. When he had finished, all eyes fell on Brahma Chaitanya and it became clear to him that he was required to speak. He explained that what he had said was the truth and further elaborated:

> Guruji, you do not live in houses made of stone and clay. You live subtly in the hearts of your devotees. Shricharan, all the space in my heart is already occupied by you.[7]

After his explanation, a prolonged silence fell upon the assembly, and Brahma Chaitanya's fellow *brahmacharin* now understood something of the depth of both question and answer. With the master's permission the shamefaced and deflated pupils removed to their quarters, leaving *guru* and *chela* alone.

It is recorded that by the age of twenty-five the runaway had become fully established in the truth of his inner self and completed his study of the scriptures. He set off from Uttar Kashi with the *guru* to stay at a village close to Rishikesh. Here it is alleged that Shri Krishnanand engaged himself in assisting life to return to a dead youth's body after it had already been prepared for cremation.

The ensuing years found Brahma Chaitanya dwelling amidst deep, dense forests pursuing the lifestyle of the religious renunciate that he was. By habit he did not fraternize with others, least of all with women. Stories abound bearing witness to his life of contemplation, his habitual prayer and his crystal-clear thinking and there are even rumours, rich in content, concerning miracle-working.

We catch up with the God-loving monk just after the turn of the century, at the famous religious festival of Kumbha Mela in the city of Allahabad, where his *guru* decided to ordain him formally into the order of *sannyasin*. Here at Prayag, the confluence of the sacred rivers Ganga and Saraswati, Brahmachari Brahma Chaitanya took the title of Shri Swami Brahmananda Saraswati Maharaj and received the symbols of swamihood, namely *kamaldalu* (a wooden pot) and *kaupeen* (loincloth). Henceforth, dressed in the flame-coloured

robe of his calling, he would attract much attention as a venerated holy man, even though he was no more than thirty-six years of age. Audience with him, though sought by many, was granted only to the few who correctly interpreted his put-offs as tests of earnestness and sincerity. Those in search of his *darshan* or 'holy look' would find themselves confronted by a hand-painted message in Hindi reading *Aaj nahin milenge*, meaning 'Today we will not meet'.[8] If visitors waited long enough, their patience would usually be rewarded. It seems that on such occasions he would initiate enquirers into secret yoga meditation techniques.

His fame spread, to such an extent that villagers desirous of his blessings would even attempt to gather dust that his feet had touched. For Swami Brahmananda, the lure of the jungle, with its offer of protection and sustenance proved irresistible. A favourite haunt of his was a cave under a waterfall where, living a frugal existence, he practised his austerities. One of his fellow *swamis* sought him out:

> He used to live only on germinated gram seeds mixed with a little bit of salt. He lived on a hillock in a small natural cave near a mountain pool. I was led there by the villagers to that place, but I did not find anyone there and became disappointed. The next day I went again and found a few footprints on the edge of the pool made by his wooden sandals. I tried but I could not track the footprints. Finally on the fifth day of effort, early in the morning before sunrise, I went back to the pool and found him taking a bath. I greeted him saying, '*Namo Narayan*', which is a commonly used salutation among swamis meaning, 'I bow to the divinity in you.' He was observing silence so he motioned for me to follow him to his small cave and I did so gladly. This was the eighth day of his silence, and after staying the night with him, he broke his silence and I gently spoke to him about the purpose of my visit. I wanted to know how he was living and the ways and methods of his spiritual practices.[9]

Such was his spiritual magnetism that some nurtured the hope that he would some day hold a religious post and therefore become more accessible. When offered the immensely prestigious position of Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math, northern India (one of the four key positions in the Hindu faith), he outrightly refused it. Again and again attempts were made to persuade him to accept the *gaddi* (throne) of Jyotir Math that had not been filled in well over a century. The prerequisites for this office are highly exclusive – candidates must be brahmin by birth and life-long celibates, they

must have a profound knowledge of the religious scriptures and be of Indian birth, and they must live in a state of enlightenment.

The passing years produced no change in Swami Brahmananda's refusal of the position of Shankaracharya. In spite of this he acquired many devotees and inspired many to follow a spiritual life. His relationship with his master, Shri Krishnanand, had long since outgrown the formalities of *guru* and *chela* and instead had become transformed into one of mutual regard, each insisting that the other be accorded the greater respect. This did not prevent the silver-haired Shri Krishnanand from urging his fellow *mahatma* to become less reclusive and to share his spiritual knowledge with the masses.

Swami Brahmananda, whilst following his inner stream of inspiration, would occasionally surface in the midst of some town or other, then after becoming ensconsed in a devotee's accommodation he would again immerse himself in prayer and meditation. Chances to glimpse him, let alone talk to him, were rare and highly sought after. In Jabalpur in central India there lived one Raj Varma, an artist, photographer and homeopath who, like many before him, was repeatedly rebuffed before gaining audience with the *swami*. In the ensuing months Raj's nephew also expressed a desire to visit the wandering hermit. He was more fortunate, for when the occasion arose, access was readily provided and, laying eyes on the robust-looking *swami*, he became convinced that here he had found his *guru*.

Mahesh Prasad Varma was born on Friday, 12 January 1917,* into a comfortably well off family, the third of four children. As an infant, Mahesh would have submitted to the customary shaving of the head and the writing (with honey upon a golden pen-nib) of the syllable *om* upon his tongue. It is likely that his father's name was also Prasad for according to custom a new-born male child bears his father's name in addition to his own. Of the *kshetriya* (warrior or 'protector') caste, his father is believed to have been a minor official in the Department of Forestry.

As a boy Mahesh would have felt the love of his family as his father and mother, uncles and aunts in turn took him upon their knee, generously sharing their sweets and affection. There were stories

* This is the date of the Maharishi's birthday as given by his uncle Raj Varma, the date his devotees also celebrate. However, other dates have been suggested, including 18 October 1911, 12 January 1918 and 18 October 1918.

for 'little Mahesh' to hear, tales of gods and demons, saints and gurus, and of people rich and poor. Of these stories, those concerning the mischievous god-child Krishna and the virtuous deeds of god-prince Rama would both have been firm favourites. From these tales the cultural values that were the boy's birthright became transferred, absorbed and reinforced. Mahesh was later to reflect on the process whereby personal values become cultivated:

> The children in India are told when you get up you bow down to your mother, you bow down to your father, you bow down to your elders. You go to the temple, you bow down to the Deity. You go to school, you bow down to your teacher.
>
> It provides a great shield of security and assistance from all quarters for the child to grow on right lines with great energy, with great intelligence, with great accomplishment, very great. And these feelings of love for mother and love for father supported by this ritual of bowing down, this later on develops in devotion to Almighty Great Father.[10]

In this regime of worshipful obedience, what chance of forgiveness could a child hope for should his behaviour became less than impeccable? Some reassurance could be derived from the much-loved stories of Krishna, the mischief-making boy who so easily won the hearts of everyone. When Krishna stole his mother's butter she tied him to a tree. When someone offered to free him, he refused, preferring to wait for his mother. Perhaps that is how it was for Mahesh:

> It is the love of a mother for her child that makes her look kindly upon his mistakes. In fact, a mother enjoys the mistakes of the child because, when he commits a mistake, she is able to give him more of her love. In that love, the child grows to be better able to overcome the weakness of committing mistakes.[11]

It is said that Mahesh was possessed of a naturally cheerful disposition, but he was later to recall:

> This has been the one question in my mind ever since I was young: God is omnipresent and God is almighty and God is merciful and in the heart of everyone, why should a man suffer having God within himself? And what is the value of oneself if he keeps suffering?[12]

The growing tide of modernity sweeping the world brought with it incitement to disobedience. The cultivation of 'free thinking' was a concept greatly valued by Westerners, but of dubious value to the highly organized structure of traditional Indian society. The suspicion was that political awareness could lead to a weakening in

religious values and possibly, given time, its eventual destruction. The dilemma that faced the educated classes was how they might gain the material advantages of 'progress' without losing their highly valued spiritual culture. Mahesh's parents faced the situation boldly and made sure that he received an above-average education. In a country where English quite literally ruled, they saw to it that he mastered not only the native language but that of the Raj too. Evidently he showed a certain promise in the scientific disciplines, although, as with many other students, the ancient language of Sanskrit posed difficulties for him. Offered the rare opportunity to engage in higher education, he undertook degree courses in both physics and mathematics at Allahabad University. But the acquisition of so much information only accentuated his hunger for deeper fulfilment:

> I was completely dissatisfied with what I studied in college. Because I knew – this can't be the whole knowledge. I was searching for something complete whereby I could understand everything.[13]

Perhaps it is true, as some say, that he then took to working at a local factory for a brief period, but it is clear that he had also become enamoured with the subject of yoga. Even amongst the most worldly and irreligious of Indian people there is a desire to hear stories of saints and miracle workers. In the busy life of material advancement that Mahesh was witness to, time could always be found to contemplate ideas concerning God and religion, and to hear stories about miracle-working holy men.

> One day someone in the street whispered to me, 'There has come a great saint, but he does not want to be known by the people. If you wish, then we shall go quietly one night.' I said, 'There could be nothing better than that.'[14]

Such was the magic of this 'saint' that just one look at the glowing silent face of Swami Brahmananda had this young man immediately enthralled. He returned again and again, making daily visits all the while the *swami* remained there.

> Then Guru Dev was gone back to the lonely forests . . . those who knew him were strictly prohibited to tell others his whereabouts.[15]

The market places in India throng with vitality. The scents of fresh vegetables, fruits and freshly gathered spices, blend with the fragrance

of burning *dhoop* (incense) and wood smoke from restaurants and *chaay* (tea) stalls to produce an exotic aroma. The sounds of the barking voices of traders calling attention to their wares, the tinkling cycle bells, the vain hooting of a car demanding the right of way, mixes with the creaking of horse *tangas* (taxis) and groaning grinding heavily laden ox-carts. One particular market place, on one particular day, was busier than usual, thronged with expectant, eager local citizens, swelled by people from out of town. The air cracked with electricity, for not only was this the monsoon season, when at any moment a torrent of rain might fall, but something even rarer, an event of a lifetime, was drawing ever closer.

The occasion that the growing mass of people awaited was the chance to take *darshan* of the Shankaracharya of northern India, the newly appointed head of the Hindu faith. Their religious life had for a century, perhaps even longer, been without its major representative. Amongst the crowd, craning his neck for a glimpse of the parade, could be seen the chubby, expectant features of young Mahesh Varma. It was now some three months since he had met Swami Brahmananda and received his blessings and guidance. On seeing him again, draped in a saffron-coloured silk robe and clutching the sceptre of his office, Mahesh set his heart on becoming his disciple. The young physicist had chosen to turn over the coin of knowledge and examine the spiritual side of existence. What better choice of *guru* could he make than this revered holy man who shunned all personal glory, having no interest in matters of power or material wealth?

Later, the procession over, Mahesh returned home to announce his intention of leaving to become a disciple to the Shankaracharya. This monumental decision, to become a monk and renounce his kith and kin and presumably all prospects of a lucrative career, apparently threw his family into great confusion. When later asked if his parents had not wanted another career for him, he replied:

> I think this is common in the parents. It all depends . . . that their son should live happily, and happiness is – he should have the comfort of a home and good family and he should live all the joys, and he should not go to the Himalayas where there is nothing and where will he sleep and do what he has to do and all that . . . because monks' life is a very hard life. No home, nothing, nothing – you sleep under the trees and meditate in the caves or wherever, whatever. So there is nothing definite in the life of a monk, particularly in India. Here in the west the monks are more organized and the church is there and they take care of it, but in India

> when one leaves home – he doesn't take care of himself, because he has no means to take care. He is out of society; no one asks him to do some work and pays him wages or anything – nothing. So now he is all in the faith of God – now that he is left with just his faith. So the life of a monk is a very very hard life. Therefore the parents don't generally like the children to take such hardships now – out of love.[16]

Swami Brahmananda insisted that before accepting Mahesh as a disciple he must fulfil two preconditions: he should complete his studies at university; and more importantly he should receive parental permission before joining him. An eligible bachelor with very good prospects, Mahesh was set to take up a wife and a profession. Mr Varma senior therefore listened to the Shankaracharya with extreme reservations but at length reluctantly consented to his son's departure.

2

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HIMALAYAN HERMITAGE

It might be wondered why Mahesh's *guru*, Swami Brahmananda, had finally been persuaded to take the mantle of Shankaracharya when for twenty years he had steadfastly refused to succumb. The simple answer is that he was not persuaded.

Long, long ago, some say as long ago as 2500 years, came one who was to be known as Adi Shankara. To him is attributed the mass spiritual reawakening of the people of India at that time. At the age of thirty-three, just before departing from his earthly body, he arranged for the future management of religious guidance by setting up a *math* (monastery) at each point of the compass. The first of these was headed by his disciple Trottakacharya and located at Jyotir Math (modern-day Joshimath) in the Garhwal Himalayas. Shankara is said by believers to have been the incarnation of the god Shiva (also known as Shankar), the only incarnation in human form. Lord Shiva is perceived as Lord of the Yogis and worshipped by many anchorites of this discipline. Shiva has many names or epithets, amongst them that of Mahesh (Sanskrit for 'Great Lord' or 'God'). The naming of children in India is taken very seriously and a *pandit* is generally consulted for the purpose. Contemplation of one's own name is thought to encourage specific desirable qualities and tendencies if it has been correctly chosen. It is of note that Swami Brahmananda's name at birth was Rajaram ('King Rama') and as he grew older he took to the chant of *Ram naam satya hai.*

Adi Shankara, in setting up the *maths* had produced reference points at which the wandering *sadhus* and *swamis* might congregate. It has been suggested that the favoured movement of such people should be in a circular flow, forever passing through the lives of everyday folks or *grihastas* (householders). It is clear that with the lapse in the lineage of Jyotir Math, coinciding as it did with British rule, the plans of Shankara had been upset, leading to religious and

moral decline. All this was known to Swami Brahmananda, no doubt, but though possessing the necessary credentials for office, he preferred to remain in the quietude and anonymity of forests and jungles. Nevertheless the requests had continued. In fact, by 1941 the situation was set to come to a head. Through the efforts of two *swamis*, Gyanandji and Karpatri, pressure was brought to bear on him to comply with their wishes. It surprised all concerned when he appeared to yield. Accordingly arrangements were immediately made to bring about his installation. Only two days before the great event, he did his second significant disappearing trick (the first having been on the eve of his marriage). Taking the seat of Shankara could make incalculable demands on him, and perhaps this was why he so unceremoniously slipped the net. There was much consternation at his conduct, but rather than look elsewhere for a substitute, the celebrations were merely postponed.

When Swami Brahmananda re-emerged in Benares some three weeks later, news of his return brought the representatives running to him, begging for his co-operation. On this occasion he neither accepted nor rejected their offers. No agreements were made, he remained silent. However, since he had not disagreed, the plans for his investiture were reinstituted and out of expediency commenced without delay. The traditional rites were brief but complete. As of Tuesday, 1 April 1941 the nation had as head of Jyotir Math, Badrikashram, Himalayas, the highly respected Jagadguru Shrimad Swami Brahmananda Saraswati Maharaj Ji. Seated within a pallaquin atop a mature elephant he allowed himself to be paraded before the people and, it is said, at a conference held in his honour he was given an outstanding reception. The Maharajah of Darbhanga delivered a speech extolling the *swami*'s greatness and amidst the celebrations, with the chanting of hymns in full swing, a feeling of great optimism settled and enveloped those gathered there. It seemed for those present as though a new era were dawning in the history of the Indian people.

During the first months of his ministry, Swami Brahmananda (or 'Guru Dev' – *dev* meaning 'divine' – as many of his disciples addressed him) made a tour of southern India and on his return attended the religious ceremony of Maharudra *yagya*, convened in Madhya Pradesh. Shortly thereafter he took on a new disciple, young Mahesh Varma, complete with degrees in physics and mathematics.

Mahesh's Uncle Raj offered this insight into his nephew's enthusiasm and commitment for his new life with the Shankaracharya:

> He came to the ashram as a youth bubbling over with mirth, full of energy and joy of living. He became so devoted to his master in everything . . .
> At night he lay down outside Guru Dev's door.[17]

This vision of the new disciple's devotion to his teacher is echoed in the Maharishi's own recollections.

> Right from the beginning the whole purpose was just to breathe in his breath. This was my ideal. The whole purpose was just to attune myself with Guru Dev, and that was all I wanted to do.[18]

In undertaking to serve as a disciple, together with the usual vows of service and celibacy he took a new name, that of Bal Brahmacharya Mahesh. The relationship of *guru* and *chela*, an ancient time-honoured Indian tradition, is not entered lightly, for the *guru*, in accepting a pupil, assumes responsibility for his welfare. In addition to offering material security he is also expected to render such guidance and assistance as might bring about the latter's spiritual advancement. In return for this total support, the *chela* commits himself completely, dedicating his every thought, word and action to God and *guru*. Demanding and serious though this relationship most certainly is, it is not an act of total renunciation for the disciple. According to tradition those wishing to renounce material existence (and its attachments) fully are initiated into the order of *sannyasin*. Only after taking the vow of *sannyas* is the title of *swami* conferred.

A pressing task for the new Shankaracharya was to address the problem of reconstructing the monastery in the township of Joshimath, which had been destroyed by an earthquake in 1851–2. Before dealing with the rebuilding programme, a primary problem lay in gaining repossession of the Jyotishpeeth land. In this matter the new Shankaracharya was assisted by Sir Joseph Clay, the former Deputy-Commissioner of Garhwal Himalayas and adviser to the Secretary of State. On a hill situated between snow-clad Himalayan peaks lay the ruins of the former monastery, and in the grounds, the ancient mulberry tree (surviving to this day) which Adi Shankara is supposed to have planted with his own hands. Beneath the roots of this now vast tree is the cave or *gupha* which served as his hermitage. Adjacent to this and a little way down the hill, lies the cave of his disciple Trottakacharya, whom Adi Shankara nominated as the first Shankaracharya. On the site of the original monastery an attractive, simple thirty-room structure came to be built. In addition to this work, the construction of a temple in the monastery grounds was completed at the behest of the Maharajah of Darbhanga.

A photograph in Raj Varma's possession, apparently taken at Jyotir Math at this time, shows Swami Brahmananda with his disciples gathered around him. The master sits cross-legged in a simple wooden armchair 'throne', his hair now a few inches long. To one side of him, a man with splendid beard and turban (perhaps a Gurkha soldier), attired in military-style tunic and bearing a fearsome-looking shotgun over one shoulder, stands guard. The *chelas* vary in age from about eighteen to eighty. Brahmachari Mahesh stands amongst them, clad in white *dhoti* (sheet) with a shawl around his shoulders (the mountain air can be exceedingly chill).

Although the Shankaracharya was not openly accessible, an audience with him was now generally easier to secure. Gone were the days when the best that could be hoped for was a glimpse of him or the rare opportunity to attend the half-hour prayer evenings he conducted. Now all who took the trouble to find him could partake of his *darshan* and attend his brief lectures.

Joshimath at a height of 6500 ft, was a halting point for pilgrims undertaking the strenuous circuit of *Uttra Khand Yatra*, a tour of holy places in that region of the Himalayas. Whilst *en route* to Badrinath, a principal Hindu shrine to the god Vishnu, many pilgrims also wished to pay homage to the Shankaracharya Gaddi ('Seat of Shankara'). After the arduous climb towards the monastery, and observing the venerated caves on the way, visitors would make their way on past the small shrine dedicated to the goddess Purnagiri Devi. After making the breathtaking ascent they would arrive at the *math*, climb the stairs at the front of the low, long, two-storey building and be welcomed into a small hall. On a highly polished wooden throne, low and wide, beautifully carved with flowers and Sanskritic texts, and strewn about with cushions, sat the upright figure of the Shankaracharya upon his deerskin. On the walls of the hall large mirrors had been carefully placed, reflecting not only the many adjacent vases of flowers but also the images of visitors as they presented themselves.

Prominently displayed at the entrance to the building, a signboard warned newcomers against trying to offer donations. Those perplexed at this unusual request were only more confused on learning that the Shankaracharya's ever-expanding title had been supplemented and prefixed by the words *Ananta Shri Vibushit*, that is to say 'Bestowed with Infinite Wealth'. A contemporary spiritual teacher, Swami Rama, himself well respected, confirms that Swami Brahmananda was 'unaffected by worldly temptations and dis-

tractions'.[19] This assertion finds ample support in the tale of a visit by the Shankaracharya, to the city of Kanpur, when he exhorted those wishing to make offerings, 'I am not one to be satisfied with offerings of rupees and paisas, which are like dust and pebbles to me. Offer to me bagfuls of your vices.'[20]

As a master he was no less uncompromising, as the following account indicates. Brahmachari Mahesh was given an errand to run. His *guru* requested that he urgently run to a location high up and far away (probably to distant Tapoban where the *siddhas*, those with supernatural powers, are said to live), in order that he might deliver a message to a saint who dwelt there. On arriving, the breathless and exhausted disciple waited for the reply. The saint, after reading the message, merely bid him return quickly to his *guru*. Many times did the *brahmachari* find himself on such a mission and on one such occasion, as a result of his undue haste, he tripped and fell. After dusting himself down, he stooped to recover his *guru*'s precious message, only to find it had become unsealed. Curiosity gained the better of him and he read it. The message said simply: 'Please instruct this *brahmachari* to return immediately.' One can imagine the novice's amazement as he read this. But how did the *brahmachari* interpret this seemingly purposeless service to his teacher?

> The disciple adjusts his likes and dislikes to the likes and dislikes of the Master, thereby elevating his mind to the status of the master's mind. In this nothing matters except obedience.[21]

For two and a half years Brahmachari Mahesh made it his single-minded task to perfectly attune himself to his master's every wish and whim, for in so doing, he no doubt hoped to acquire his own enlightenment. In time, Swami Brahmananda, apparently pleased with his disciple's spiritual progress, granted him permission to retire to a cave in order to practice his *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) in seclusion.

The Shankaracharya's outward appearance had radically altered; his hair, brushed back from his forehead, was now grown long, and he had grown his beard, a full and resplendent growth. From the rare photographs and surviving amateur film footage, glimpses can be gained of his demeanour. Although more frequently caught in solemn mood, there is evidence that he could display a radiant smile and project a lively sense of fun and jollity – an enigmatic combination, perhaps indicating two facets of the same reality, on the one side projecting his inner serenity, on the other his joy of outer existence. He made sure that life was not all duty and tests for his

brahmacharin; time was also given over to the study of the scriptures, prayer, contemplation and meditation.

In the role of Shankaracharya, Swami Brahmananda performed the function of a religious teacher, bringing out the essence of the traditional Hindu teachings for his flock. It has been said that when the *swami* met sincere seekers he would sometimes initiate them into the mysteries of yoga meditation. These teachings were necessarily passed on in a climate of faith and worship, although the precise form of the meditation is uncertain. Reconciling the devotional nature of Hinduism with its myriad forms of God, its multiple and varied forms of worship with the rigors of objective science must have forced Brahmachari Mahesh to more than once ponder that 'man cannot serve two masters'. However, it would be unwise to infer that the techniques the *swami* taught could only survive in a framework of religiosity. It would be equally incautious to assume the opposite. In point of fact a 'science' of the worlds of both matter and spirit has long been studied in India, although quite how closely this discipline accords with modern science is a subject for debate. But before dismissing it, we should at least be aware of our debt in the field of mathematics, for the so called 'Arab' numerals which we use every day in point of fact originated in India.

The word *Veda* means knowledge as does the word science. According to many, the *Rig Veda* is said to be the oldest record of human thought, and though its Aryan authors were once believed to be of European extraction, Indians have steadfastly held the *Vedas* as their own. Descriptions of the geophysical environment in which this civilization dwelt offer much support for this latter contention. A key area of Vedic science is in its classification of energy and matter in terms of *gunas* or qualities: *sattvic* (pure), *rajasic* (energetic) and *tamasic* (impure). It is still common practice in India to refer to foods according to this code, hence *tamasic* food would be that which is over-cooked or over-processed, while *rajasic* would be most appetising and tasty, highly seasoned and spiced, but low in nutrients. A *sattvic* diet would naturally include fresh fruit and vegetables, pulse foods, cereals and dairy produce.

When the Shankaracharya was out pursuing his missionary work, the running of the *math* fell to those *swamis* who remained behind. In winter milk was virtually unobtainable, for the cattle were taken to the lower mountain reaches. Fruit and vegetables were scarce too, so that the *swamis*, living their *sattvic* lives out on the mountainside without the conveniences of delicatessens or supermarkets, had to

make do on very little. From Herbert Tichy, the European explorer and mountaineer, we gain this insight:

> In Yoshimath the Sherpa Nima and I fought a cheerful but obstinately contested battle with the aged priest Govindanand. For several weeks we had shared the Spartan life of the hermits, eating neither vegetables nor fruit, and we craved vitamins. The bazaar at Yoshimath could supply only onions and garlic, but with these we were content. When the appetizing savor of the rice with onions which Nima had prepared spread through the building, however, Govindanand burst into our cell in a rage. Did we not know, he asked, that onions were an 'apple of voluptuousness,' strictly forbidden in the monastery?
>
> No, we did not know it, and we had no voluptuous desires whatever. Hostilities ensued, ending with our eating the onions, which we really did not want to forgo, raw and at a safe distance from the monastery, although this did not diminish the sinful smell that emanated from us. Nevertheless, we departed in peace and with the priest's blessing.[22]

Perhaps we should ask ourselves what had provoked the young Mahesh Varma to give up the comfort and ease of his former life in exchange for such austerities. In later years he was many times to describe the 'Flash' of his 'Guru Dev's' presence. But was this personal magnetism the sole reason for submitting himself to a life of physical and mental endurance (it is recorded that for five years he had to abstain from the use of salt)? We find an answer in the statement made many years later, when he claimed his life only truly began nineteen years before, when he learned the secret of 'swift and deep meditation'. This indicates that even before he became a *brahmachari*, Swami Brahmananda had instructed him in a technique of meditation. It would appear that on receipt of this teaching he became a changed man, so much so that he cut himself off from his former life in order to be with his benefactor.

The location of Jyotir Math was such as to deter all but the most ardent pilgrims from journeying there to take *darshan* of the ancient temples of their forefathers. Periodically the Shankaracharya would, with a few close helpers, take to travelling about the towns of the local districts. Transport for himself and his entourage presented no less a problem than for those intent on pilgrimage to the local shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath. The solution which was found for conveying the party was, to say the least, novel. Instead of using a small bus or van, a large chassis was obtained and customized. The resultant float or 'Popemobile' (the comparison is a reasonable one), on which the enthroned *swami* could travel amidst a rich array of

foliage and flowers, was used as a mobile dais, with space enough for a handful of disciples and a very careful driver.

These excursions gave one and all the chance to partake of the Shankaracharya's *darshan*, and thousands came to see him seated in his silk ochre robe, with his austere gaze, his bleach white beard, his long dark hair intermingled with the garlands of fresh flowers draped around his neck. He would always sit on a throne gilded and carved with images of lions on the arms of the seat. To ward off the glare of the sun, an umbrella shade was placed over him, fashioned from red velvet with intricate patterns, religious symbols and text, executed in golden stitching. His forehead was daubed with sandalwood paste, a measure intended to lessen the effects of the heat, and when the vehicle halted, his disciples brought out yak whisks to cool him. Many of the general populace also took the opportunity to obtain the blessing of *tilak* (a mixture of sandalwood paste, rice and red dye) anointed upon the forehead. On his mission of spiritual revival, he travelled far and wide, presiding over many ceremonies, conferences and the like.

After long periods spent in service, seclusion, study and meditation, Brahmachari Mahesh appears to have become so well attuned to his master's thoughts that he took it upon himself to become his private secretary and dealt with the majority of his correspondence without recourse to his 'Guru Dev'. Sometimes he would even be sent to some distant town or village to lecture on the scriptures. His Uncle Raj says:

> I can say straight out that Maharishi was Guru Dev's favourite disciple and no wonder – few are capable of such work and few have such unending loyalty.[23]

The Shankaracharya attracted eminent visitors. Dr S. Radhakrishnan, the famous Indian philosopher, sought guidance at his feet, as did the first President of India, Dr Rajendra Prasad, who addressed him as 'Vedanta Incarnate' or 'The embodiment of the scriptures'. A photograph taken in December 1952 shows the President standing beside the barefoot Mahesh. Brahmachari Mahesh, was later to describe his master thus:

> His entire personality exhaled always the serene perfume of spirituality. His face radiated that rare light which comprises love, authority, serenity and self-assuredness; the state that comes only by righteous living and Divine realization.

> His spiritual teachings are simple and clear and go straight home to the heart. He strictly adhered to the courses of inner development laid down by the systems of Indian Philosophy and ethics . . .[24]

Photographs taken at this time show the Shankaracharya to have aged considerably, his health having for some time given cause for much concern. Homoeopathic and allopathic (Western) medicines were administered to him but were of no avail, and he declined rapidly. At 1.15 pm on Wednesday, 20 May 1953, after a period of five minutes absorbed in silent meditation, Shankaracharya Swami Brahmananda Saraswati breathed his last. Hours before his death he allegedly summoned Brahmachari Mahesh and explained to him that, as a dying father's unfinished business is dealt with by his sons, the same is true for the *guru* and his *chela*. He directed him to:

> . . . look around. Many people are dejected. There is a lack of energy in their minds. Their minds are not strong enough. What I have taught you also contains the knowledge of the technique for the householder, which has been misinterpreted and forgotten during the centuries.[25]

After further deliberation on this topic, the elderly swami is supposed to have added these words of reassurance:

> Don't think of money for travelling here and there. Don't worry and don't be afraid of being alone and don't be anxious about anything. Begin working and everything will go by itself.[26]

It is said that only after the *swami* had told the young *brahmachari* of his future work were instructions concerning his last rites then communicated.

After his death, still seated in the lotus position, he was taken to Calcutta railway station and transported to Benares, where at Kedareshwar Mahadev he was committed to the waters of the Ganges:

> The chest was lowered into the Ganga. Brahmachari Mahesh Yogi dived alongside and retained a touch of the precious container till it finally came to rest on the riverbed. Reverently, he bowed and surfaced again, sharing the agony perceptible in the faces surrounding him.[27]

After Swami Brahmananda's untimely death, people were left wondering who, if anyone, would be appointed in his stead. It will be observed that one of the preconditions of entitlement to this post is being born a brahmin. Brahmachari Mahesh, being of the kshetriya caste, was not eligible to hold this venerated office. So on Friday, 12

June 1953, at the wish of Swami Brahmananda, his close disciple Sri Swami Shantanand Saraswatiji Maharaj was installed as successor to the throne of Shankaracharya.

With his master's passing and his fellow disciple Swami Shantanand the new Shankaracharya, Brahmachari Mahesh took leave of the monastery and 'retired to the caves of the "Valley of the Saints" in Uttar Kashi, high in the Himalayas'.[28] Uttar Kashi (northern place of Shiva) is a town some way north of Rishikesh, frequented by pilgrims on their way to Gangotri, the source of the River Ganges. The town contains numerous temples, of which the largest and most impressive is Vishwanath Mandir, an old-fashioned market place, shops and artisans but few dwellings. The rest are situated across the river and in the hills to each side of the valley. The local populace live a traditional life, preparing their food seated on the broad verandas of their simple wooden-beamed homes and storing foodstuffs for their few animals in hayricks in the upper branches of trees. Overhead fly the crows and large birds of prey: kestrels and even eagles. In former times wild animals roamed, making it unsafe for anyone to venture out after dark.

It was in this remote and ancient place that Swami Brahmananda had found his *guru* and taken initiation into the mysteries of yoga. The town is renowned for its community of scholars, *sadhus*, *swamis* and *mahatmas*, most of whom live in an area known as Gyan Suu. Here, where the sight of holy men and saints is considered commonplace, Brahmachari Mahesh, covered only with his loose long black hair and simple white robe would not have attracted much attention. The destination he sought lay on the outskirts of town, an *ashram* by the name of Sri Shankaracharya Gyan Mandir. Located a comfortable distance from the main Rishikesh–Gangotri road and bordering the gurgling Bhagirathi River (an alternative name for the sacred River Ganges), the *ashram* is situated within reasonably spacious grounds whose perimeters are lined with trees (some of them yielding bananas and oranges) which provide a screen from the neighbouring lands. On the sandy banks of the crystal-clear waters of the Ganges, people wash themselves and their clothes, but the river has exacted payment in that over the years successive monsoons have swollen its waters, resulting in significant loss of land to the *ashram*.

The focus of the buildings of Gyan Mandir ('Knowledge Temple') is an impressive shrine, a *Shivalinga* (ancient symbol of the forces of creativity). Surrounding the temple are the buildings containing simple whitewashed cells which provide accommodation for inmates and

occasional visitors. A few also contain a *gupha* or cave below floor level.

Having arrived at Gyan Mandir, Mahesh committed himself to prolonged spells of deep silence.

> Where I stay in a small Ashram in Uttar Kashi, the cave is like a very small basement under a room. The entrance is through an opening only big enough for one person to enter. Down there is quiet. No sound. Cool in summer. Warm in winter.[29]

Amongst the hermits thereabouts the prevailing attitude was (and still is) abstention from everyday mundane cares. Seeking direct contact with God or Brahman is believed to be the only worthwhile activity and any deviation is perceived as wasted energy. Brahmachari Mahesh was to spend many months in solitude in his sandy cave. If he wanted to sleep he had only to take to the bed that lay directly above the cave. He would come out only to take exercise, to deal with the normal bodily functions or take the occasional meal which a man from the town would bring and leave outside his door.

For most of the *brahmachari*'s time at Uttar Kashi he kept his own company. On those rare occasions when he took companionship it was with a fellow truth-seeker, and even then, more often than not they would spend the time in silence. 'We hardly ever spoke . . . After all, there was really nothing to talk about.'[30] After years of devoted service to his master, he had to acclimatize himself to life without the *swami*'s living presence. He pursued his *sadhana* and in spite of the isolation (or perhaps because of it), he began to entertain the notion of travel.

He had a friend who came to visit, an extremely elderly monk who wore his hair so long that it trailed along the ground behind him. This growth became burdensome to him and he therefore decided to cut it, preferring a scalp both shorn and shaven. On hearing of the younger man's hankering for travel the old man set about explaining why there was no advantage in leaving the confines of Uttar Kashi. 'This is holy ground,' his companion said. 'All the rest is just mud.'[31] On that note the subject was firmly closed. However Mahesh's wish to travel persisted.

> 'When I mentioned to him a few weeks later he said, 'I think you have been thinking of it for so long. Why not get rid of this thought, and get rid of this thought means go there and come back and never think of it again.' When he said that, this purpose of not returning or returning didn't come to my mind. But at least he responded to that idea which was coming to my mind – go to Rameshvaram, go to Rameshvaram.[32]

As a *brahmachari*, Mahesh had become used to taking instructions (both implicit and explicit) and must therefore have found it difficult to take responsibility for his own actions. The great wide world, spurned during study under his master, now awaited his return. He might have chosen any destination, but his thought had been to visit Rameshvaram, a place of religious pilgrimage in southern India. With the required permission, Mahesh was soon to commence his journey.

3

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THE MAHARISHI EMERGES

After the year and a half or so spent in seclusion at Gyan Mandir, Brahmachari Mahesh took to the road in order to follow his inspiration to visit southern India. His destination was very close to Sri Lanka, which is renowned for its religious atmosphere, drawing pilgrims from all over the subcontinent. After touring around the temples and holy shrines of Rameshvaram, the lone hermit moved down to the southernmost peninsula of Cape Comorin to spend time at Kannyakumari. From the temple there, he then travelled some way northwards into the state of Kerala, to the coastal town of Trivandum in search of yet another place of worship. Whilst walking toward the temple of Guruvayur Krishna Mandir in Trivandum, the footloose traveller sensed that someone was following close behind him. At length he was overtaken and a stranger, after introducing himself, began to question him as to whether or not he ever spoke in public, asking, 'Would you bring some of the wisdom of the Himalayas to us?'[33]

The *brahmachari* explained that he was unaccustomed to giving lectures but told the stranger where he might be contacted should a meeting be arranged. The stranger returned and during the following week a series of lectures were held in the locality. Such was the interest generated by these talks that the local press was alerted and further lectures were arranged. Even after a further six months in Kerala, the *brahmachari* still had no immediate plans to return to his cave at Uttar Kashi. When he was not busy lecturing he would spend much time in the company of the prominent lawyer responsible for arranging his schedule of talks.

Mahesh's master, the late Shankaracharya Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, had many devotees in southern India who had grouped together in the city of Alleppey to found and dedicate to his name the Adhyatmic Vikas Mandal (the Society for Spiritual Development). At

nearby Cochin arrangements were made for *yagyas* (religious rituals) to be performed from 23 to 26 October 1955. The numbers of the late Shankaracharya's devotees who arrived from all over India swelled the already sizeable congregation. Led by Vedic *pandits* the daily ceremonies were performed and there followed conferences which took personal development as their topic. These events were accompanied by a grand parade along local thoroughfares in which Brahmachari Mahesh appears to have been the centre of attraction, being the only person present pictured wearing a garland of flowers.

Inside the hall, to the centre of the low, wide stage was placed an ornate throne upon which was set a garlanded framed picture of the late Shankaracharya Swami Brahmananda. The framed portrait of the revered teacher was illuminated from above by a standard lamp, its shade shiny and lined with tassels, resembling the parasol formerly associated with the departed *swami*. In festive spirit, coloured paper decorations were suspended from the ceiling and hung about the walls. The congregation, comprising young boys sitting at the front, their elders behind them and women in a group to one side, sat in rapt attention upon cotton matting strewn about the floor. The assembly was estimated at over 10,000, although it is doubtful whether the hall itself contained more than a few hundred. Messages of goodwill were read to them from the current Shankaracharyas of Jyotir and Shringeri Maths.

The star of the show, Maharshi ('Great Sage') Bala Brahmachari Mahesh Yogi Maharaj of Uttar Kasi, Himalayas, opened his lecture by saying:

> It gives me great pleasure this afternoon to be in the company of you all here assembled in the close vicinity of the Maha Yagna Mandapam. From the early morning the atmosphere here is being surcharged with the Divine Vibrations of Rig Veda and Yajur Veda Parayanam and the chantings of the Maha Yagna Mantras.[34]

As he moved through the formalities of paying homage to the previous speaker (the Maharajah of Cochin) and to those well-wishers who had written to the assembly, he indicated that the occasion was 'graciously sanctified by the presence of the great Lord Shiva and his retinue'. His message of hope centred on the promise that *sat-chit-anandam* (unlimited bliss) is available to all:

> Then why waste time in helplessness and suffer any agony in life? Why suffer when you can enjoy? Why be miserable when you can be happy? Now, let the days of misery and peacelessness be over and let their

> operation become tales of the past. Allow not the past history of agony to be continued in the present. Be happy and gay.[35]

After introducing his philosophy in a general way, he then boldly claimed to hold answers which could solve the dilemma of suffering mankind. In the second of his lectures, he held forth on the physical location of the *sat-chit-anandam* he had referred to previously, stating:

> Electrons and protons of the modern science, seen through the Indian system of analysis of the universe, are manifestations of Agni-Tatwa and Vayu-Tatwa combined. The energy of the electrons and protons is due to the Agni-Tatwa and motion in them is due to Vayu-Tatwa. Thus we find, the present day science has reached up to Vayu-Tatwa in the field of analysis of the universe.[36]

Naming the successively finer strata of creation as *Agni*, *Vayu*, *Akash*, *Aham*, *Mahat* and *Prakriti*, he concluded:

> And finer than the Prakriti-Tatwa and the very cause of it is the Brahma-Tatwa which is the Ultimate Reality, the subtlest 'Anoraniyan', Sat-Chit-Anandam.[37]

For this audience of exclusively Indian composition, so recently released from the grip of Western rule and knowing the scorn that had been heaped upon their traditional beliefs, this elucidation must have been as pure nectar. Although his explanation must have been confusing to them, they were reassured that here was a man who could reconcile the most modern beliefs with those of their forefathers.

Various other speakers took to the microphone, including the Maharajah of Cochin and the barrister Shri A.N. Menon, who noted:

> The world has known saints performing miracles of various nature, but here is a saint whose miracle works in the inner man to glorify it.[38]

This 'miracle' that 'works in the inner man' is undoubtedly an allusion to the system of meditation that was currently being taught by the Maharishi. Although it is difficult to identify the actual technique prescribed, it can safely be assumed that it centred on the use of a personal *mantra* or special sound to be intoned by the practitioner. Mention of the efficacy of certain recommended mantras was made, although a warning was given against the use by 'householders' of the magic syllable *om*. This advice strongly echoes the council of the Maharishi's own *guru* in that he specifically advised women to avoid

the use of *om* and use in its stead the syllable *shri*, holding that the repetition of *om* could create a potentially disastrous mentality of unwordliness for them. The Maharishi addresses the topic in the following manner:

> 'Om' is the Mantra for the Sanyasi. The Sanyasi repeats 'Om Om Om'. It is given to him at the time of 'Sanyas-Diksha', at the time when he has completely renounced attachment to the world. Renunciation and detachment increase with the repetition of 'Om'. 'Om' is chanted aloud by a Sanyasi to put an end to his desires. Desires are destroyed by loudly chanting the mantra 'Om'. And if there is any desire deeply rooted in the mind of a Sanyasi, the chanting of 'Om' will result in the destruction of the object of such desire in order to make the Sanyasi, wholly desireless.[39]

The audience, hanging on every syllable of his words, gazed attentively at the Maharishi as he continued:

> If unfortunately, the householder begins to repeat the pranava Mantra viz. 'Om', 'Om', 'Om' he experiences destructive effects in his material life. The effect starts with monetary loss and then goes on to destroy objects of affection, one by one. Such a man, when he finds loss of money and separation from the dear ones, he is reduced to utter peacelessness and frustration.[40]

He remained all the while seated upon a deerskin in the cross-legged lotus posture, his large dark eyes flashing to the flow of his speech. Simply attired in a white *dhoti*, garlands of fresh marigolds around his flourishing full beard and long black hair, he possessed many outward symbols of his vocation, which emphasized the authority of his words. After the stern warning with regard to dabbling in mystical practices he gave the following opinion:

> It is not at all necessary for the householder to go for direct practice of 'Tyaga' or 'Vairagya' [Renunciation] for realisation. That practice is unnatural for him, antagonistic to his nature and opposed to his way of life.[41]

For centuries the philosophy of detachment had permeated Indian thinking. At a stroke such beliefs had been set at nought! Stripping away the unfamiliar Sanskritic terms, his message stands revealed: 'You don't have to become a monk or adopt a monkish mode of life to experience the highest of spiritual goals.' This was a message that many wished to hear. There were few present who might have found the hermit life alluring. But on the other hand, how could real peace of mind be experienced whilst caught up in the thick of everyday life,

with its share of disappointments and unavoidable miseries? There must therefore be a catch!

The Maharishi expounded his philosophy yet further by pointing out that attachment to material life lies solely in the area of thought and that since even the greatest material treasures are seldom located upon one's person, it is only the thought of wealth that confers the sense of ownership. He explained that for a householder to experience a state of 'non-attachment' he must first have acquired the ability to transcend or 'go beyond' thoughts related to the outer world.

In less than a year the *brahmachari* had so far distanced himself from his life of abstinence and seclusion as to be lecturing the people of southern India that they were missing nothing that could not be had in the comfort of their own homes. In the search for *sat-chit-ananda*, many took him at his word and asked for instruction into his meditation practices. The end of the three-day conference was marked by a rousing cheer of '*Jai Shri Guru Deva*' ('Glory to the Blessed Guru Divine') in praise of the *guru* of the Maharishi.

To commemorate the conference, a souvenir booklet was published under the name *Beacon Light of the Himalayas*, subtitled 'The Dawn of a Happy New Era in the Field of Spiritual Practices Mind Control, Peace & Atmananda – Through simple & easy methods of Spiritual Sadhana propounded by Maharshi Bala Brahmachari Mahesh Yogi Maharaj of Uttar Kasi, Himalayas'. This publication (now lamentably difficult to acquire) contains a full transcript of speeches from Brahmachari Mahesh, the Maharajah of Cochin and others, including the barrister A.N. Menon. It provides a wealth of interesting perspectives into the early ministrations of the man who would henceforward be referred to as the Maharishi. The booklet opens with a short message, penned and signed by Bal Brahmachari Mahsh (sic):

Maharishi's Message to the Peaceless and Suffering

Oh ye of the peaceless and suffering humanity!

My happiness desires to root out your suffering. Will you extend your arm and allow me to lift you up from the mire of misery and peacelessness?

Come on, here is the call of peace and joy for you. Here is an invitation, a cordial invitation for you all to come and enjoy the Blissful Grace and All Powerful Blessings of my Lord the Great Swami Brahmanand Saraswati, the Great among the greats of the Himalayas. I have found a treasure in the Dust of His Lotus Feet and now I invite you to share it with me and make yourself happy.

> Come on; I invite you to get into the Blissful Realm of His Universal Benevolence. See, the path is straight and entry is free. Come on with faith and you will find that the very cause of your peacelessness and misery will be eradicated and you will be adorned with lasting peace and real happiness in your day to day life.[42]

Having been met with so much enthusiasm in southern India, the Maharishi took to propagating his message in the various other provinces of India. He held meditation camps in the cities of Bombay and Calcutta and at numerous other venues such as Hardwar (not very far from Uttar Kashi) and Pahalgam in Kashmir, the latter lasting for two months. How different his daily life was from that of his teacher, who at his age was secluded in a dense jungle, in prayer and contemplation.

Although hundreds, sometimes thousands, turned out to hear the Maharishi (it is even said that mass initiations were not uncommon), the desire to contact ever greater numbers of people steered him to ever greater success. After many months of touring he returned to southern India once more, this time using the city of Madras as his base, and hatched plans for a rather remarkable event. Invitations were dispatched with a view to drawing together disciples of the late Swami Brahmananda for a great celebration of his memory. The Seminar of Spiritual Luminaries was to be held in Mylapore, and 'eminent saints and philosophers of all countries' were encouraged to attend. The stated reason for calling together these people was 'to contribute their experience in finding out a practical formula of spiritual regeneration of the world'.

Perhaps this seminar was, in reality, nothing but a gesture of goodwill, for the Maharishi could not hope to pursue his endeavours without first gaining the support of the late Shankaracharya's other disciples. Be that as it may, the wording of the invitation made direct reference to hoped-for contributions, which seems to imply that the Maharishi's techniques of 'mind control' were still open to improvement. It is very likely that he entertained doubts about his methods and hoped that this event might prove an opportunity to garner important feedback, most especially from his peer group. In addition to this apparent insecurity, it is likely that he also looked forward to hearing testimonies in support of his extravagant claims, thus endorsing and confirming as a *maharishi* the erstwhile *brahmachari*, who had promised his audience in Kerala:

> Here is no empty promise of Heaven after death. Here is the positive experience of 'Heavenly Bliss' during lifetime. Come on who desires for it . . .[43]

It is said that the Seminar of Luminaries was attended by over 10,000 people and that as it drew to a close the Maharishi felt inclined to ask those assembled there: 'Why can't we spiritually regenerate the world through this technique?' Apparently his question drew tumultuous applause, prompting him to arrange a day's extension to the festivities. The Seminar's invitation to find 'a practical formula of spiritual regeneration of the world' proved to be somewhat self-fulfilling for on Wednesday, 1 January 1958 the Maharishi announced:

> The one aim of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement is to provide a simple and easy method of meditation and infuse this system of meditation in the daily life of everybody everywhere on earth. To meet this end, this Movement had been started to work for the construction of meditation centres everywhere in every part of human habitation.[44]

The Maharishi later explained:

> It was the concern of Guru Deva, His Divinity Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, to enlighten all men everywhere that resulted in the foundation of the world-wide Spiritual Regeneration Movement in 1958, five years after his departure from us.[45]

In the following months, in addition to the holding of several more spiritual development camps, a total of twenty-five meditation centres were opened across India. It was at Bangalore in the spring of 1958 that the Maharishi claims to have been inspired to make his next move. After finishing his meditation, he slipped into a state of introspection:

> One fine morning I thoughtfully reviewed the work done and calculated how much time it will take for the whole world with this rate and I found out that it will take 200 years (laughter).
>
> Then I said 'No, I must change my ways of work'; then I thought what to do. Then I thought: I must go to the most advanced country because I thought – the country is most advanced because the people of that country would try something new very readily.[46]

> When I met some people in the morning I said, 'I want to go to America,' and they said, 'All right'.[47]

Letters giving news of the Maharishi's desire were quickly dispatched to followers in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Within a few days there came a response: 'Send him here, he will stay with us for two weeks, and we will make all arrangements.'[48]

Not long after this generous offer he received other invitations from those with business interests abroad. This was not what the Maharishi wanted.

> No, your connections will be business connections, and they are based on profit – money – so they will not be of any use to me.[49]

Arrangements were made, but the trip to America had to be delayed whilst travel documents were obtained. During the lengthy wait for his passport, a farewell tour of Kerala was arranged during which he met numerous well-wishers, including various dignitaries who made richly worded speeches in support of his mission.

On Sunday, 27 April 1958 the Maharishi made for Calcutta Airport not to catch a flight to the United States of America, but to make a relatively short hop across the Bay of Bengal to the capital of neighbouring Burma. His arrival in Rangoon contrasted greatly with his massive send-off from India; there was only one individual waiting to meet him from the plane. Before long however, the wandering *brahmachari* attracted considerable attention and within a short while several lecture dates were organized. As a result of these few talks, many candidates were found who wished to learn how to practise his style of meditation. An unexpected boost to his popularity came when the prediction of an aged Buddhist monk became known – a year before, he had foretold that a great Indian yogi would visit Rangoon on *Bodhipurnima* Day. This prophecy brought forth visits from monks, high-ranking officials and a large complement of local men, women and children. This was the first clear indication that the Maharishi's teachings were capable of attracting people from outside the specifically Hindu world. After ten days of talks and initiations, the Maharishi triumphantly returned to Rangoon Airport ready to embark on the next leg of his journey. A rousing send-off had been organized and a veritable sea of Burmese and Indians thronged the departure lounge to send him on his way, causing the Maharishi jubilantly to consider the truth of an old maxim. 'Then it rang in my mind: "Well begun is half done."'[50]

So it was that in May 1958 he flew to Bangkok and then to the island of Penang. On Thursday, 22 May the *Times of Malaya* carried an interview in which the Maharishi declared:

> My system of meditation is a golden link to connect and harmonize materialism and spirituality. It is a direct process to integrate man's life on earth. I invite everyone to take the maximum advantage of my stay in Penang.

In Penang, he found many Indian expatriates eager to receive his message and notably even found appreciation from the Sikh community, traditionally wary of Hindu doctrines. Whether he spoke at temples or *gurudwaras*, interested individuals would gather to hear of the blessings of Shri Guru Deva.

After spending only a few weeks in Penang, he journeyed some 300 km south to the city of Kuala Lumpur, capital of Malaya. He met with no less success there than he had in Penang. Nevertheless, after staying only ten days there, the spur to travel found him garlanded and bidding goodbye and '*Jai Shri Guru Deva*' to new-found devotees. The touring continued and by 14 June 1958 he had settled in Singapore. Whilst working on plans for the establishment of a meditation centre there, news came that a broadcast he had prepared for Radio Malaya during his stay in Kuala Lumpur was shortly to be broadcast. It was transmitted at 9 pm on Thursday, 24 July, and for five minutes the airwaves resounded to his high-pitched tones as millions listened to his message.

> When we think about the joys of the world and try to locate the permanent abode of greatest happiness, we find that through our senses we are experiencing the charm of gross nature, and the charm of the subtler fields of nature are not being experienced . . .
>
> The real joy of life lies in the field of subtle nature, beyond the field of sense perception . . .
>
> It is the experience of thousands of people coming in my contact that they begin to feel calmness of mind, more energy and happiness in their daily life within two or three sittings . . .[51]

From Singapore the Maharishi returned to Penang where he set about establishing another Spiritual Development Centre and training more Spiritual Guides to continue his work. The ceremonial opening of the centre was performed by the Mayor of Penang, after which the centre's General Secretary gave a speech in which he referred to the Maharishi's technique of meditation as a 'spiritual sputnik from the Himalayas'.[52] The Russians with their Sputnik 1 and the Americans with their Explorer 1 had opened up the space race – was it just coincidence that at the dawn of the space age, the realms of inner space were being newly re-explored too?

By mid-August 1958 the Singapore meditation centre was also ready to be opened and the occasion was celebrated at the city's Victoria Memorial Hall. It was intended that the centre should take as its leader a newly appointed Spiritual Guide who for the past quarter of a century had been President of the Buddhist Union. The role of officiator at this inauguration was to be filled not by the centre's leader, however but by no less a person than the bespectacled Chief Minister of Singapore, Mr Lim Yew Hock. From the *Beacon Light* conference onwards, the Maharishi had shown a marked tendency to court the approval and sponsorship of the powerful and the rich, and at important functions he would ensure that he sat in the company of persons of high social standing. Of those who spoke at the opening on 17 August, the testimony of one speaker, a business magnate, is of particular note.

> Within three or four days of the initiation, I was able to enjoy unspeakable happiness, calmness, and peace. Now I always feel full of spiritual vigour and happiness. Maharishi is grand like the Himalayas wherefrom he comes, but humble like a child, great like truth but simple like love.[53]

Spurred on no doubt by such unwavering support as this, the lone *brahmachari* relentlessly pursued his quest to further publicize his teachings. The next trip was to be his longest yet, for his destination lay in faraway Hong Kong. Again he met with a ready audience, with whom he quickly set about forming a meditation centre, to be called the Happy Valley. At the Chinese Chamber of Commerce on 7 November 1958, a ceremony was held to mark the centre's inauguration. It was officiated by a local magistrate, Mr Hing Shing Lo. Following his speech the Maharishi addressed the assembled crowd and confidently pointed out that 'everybody has the capacity for Deep Meditation'.[54] Clarifying the role of the centre, he told its staff:

> It will be the sacred duty of the management to drum into the ears of the people that here is a place where everybody can get the key to all peace and happiness in life.[55]

Having stayed in Hong Kong only a little over a month, the momentum of the tour caused him to move on yet again and this time not just a hop, but a huge bound, to the island of Hawaii, from which he then intended to fly directly to America. Before he left Hong Kong, a man suggested the name of someone he might contact in Hawaii. There he again met with great success, and although he had planned to spend only two days in Honolulu he was prevailed upon to stay

longer, one month longer as it happened. On Wednesday, 31 December 1958 (one year after the formation of his movement), the *Honolulu Star Bulletin* told its readers about this visitor to the island.

> He has no money; he asks for nothing. His worldly possessions can be carried in one hand. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi is on a world odyssey. He carries a message that he says will rid the world of unhappiness and discontent . . .

It seemed that the media had found itself a new celebrity, and the Hawaiian newspapers, radio and television stations all gave exposure to his message, although it is doubtful that many fully understood it. No longer was he preaching to the converted but to an ever-widening section of the populace, of diverse denominations and persuasions.

Back in India, devotees were kept abreast of all these new developments. They received hand-written epistles from the Maharishi chronicling the movement's progress. The Madras mission took to publishing a newsletter, known as the *Torch Divine*, and in the absence of their teacher, it played a vital role not only in linking interested parties but in providing meditators with a mutual support system.

So it was that the Bal Brahmachari Mahesh who had toyed so uneasily with the recurrent thought to 'go to Rameshvaram' had not only relinquished the role of hermit but in less than four years had assumed the position of Director of Operations in an organization that took as its goal the spiritual regeneration of the world. Within nine months of travelling, the interest shown in his practice of Deep Meditation was such that its future success seemed fairly well assured.

> I had one thing in mind – that I know something which is useful to every man; therefore no matter where I am people will find in me the commodity that they want. (laugh) With that confidence I left India and gradually I came to the States.[56]